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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 003497

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE MENNUTI AND NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2013

TAGS: PHUM PREL VT

SUBJECT: TAKING THE VATICAN TO TASK ON CRITICISM OF U.S.
POLICY TOWARD MUSLIM WORLD

Classified By: Ambassador Jim Nicholson: Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Following a post-Iraq war interview in which the Vatican's senior official for inter-religious dialogue had suggested the Administration's language during the Iraq war could have created a conviction in the Muslim world that the war was a war of religion, the Ambassador challenged the official to justify this assertion and outlined USG efforts to reach out to the Muslim world since September 11. Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, President of the Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, acknowledged that his statement had been inaccurate, but defended it as a reflection of views he had heard from his contacts in the Muslim world. Fitzgerald welcomed U.S. initiatives to engage the Muslim world, and agreed on the importance of working together to overcome perceived divisions rather than add to them. End Summary

Setting the Record Straight on U.S.-Muslim Relations

12. (C) Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue -- the Vatican dicastery responsible for relations with the Muslim world -- had sharply criticized the Administration's language and tone in conducting the Iraq war in a late April interview, asserting that alleged references to God and messianic tones would "boost the impression in Muslim world that the war taking place is a war of religion." He further suggested that many Christian leaders in the U.S. had "marked their distance from President Bush on account of the language he uses." Following this interview, the Ambassador had written Fitzgerald requesting an opportunity to discuss the prelate's misperceptions.

13. (C) Meeting with Fitzgerald July 22, Ambassador Nicholson challenged Fitzgerald's statements, pointing out that the President had neither invoked God's name to justify war nor employed messianic language that would in any way suggest that the Iraq war should be seen as a religious struggle. On the contrary, the Ambassador pointed out that the President had gone out of his way to reach out to the Muslim world and to emphasize America's respect for the Muslim faith and Muslim people. He recalled the President's post-September 11 visit to the Washington mosque, his hosting of Iftaar dinners, and meetings with Muslim leaders. He also pointed out that the U.S. has repeatedly acted in defense of and to provide liberty to Muslim populations in Kuwait, Bosnia, and Afghanistan and Iraq. The Ambassador emphasized that statements such as this from the Holy See could be seen as an affirmation by extremists for their critical views of the U.S. Given that the U.S. and Holy See were both seeking to overcome perceptions of division between the West and the Muslim world, the Ambassador concluded, Fitzgerald's statement "really sets us back."

14. (C) Fitzgerald acknowledged the inaccuracy of his statements and the potential for misunderstanding they could generate. At the same time, he expressed his strong objection to the U.S. characterization of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "axis of evil," saying he did not regard the people of those countries as evil. The Ambassador pointed out that the term referred to the oppressive governments of those countries, and not the people who suffered under them. While begrudgingly acknowledging the Ambassador's point, Fitzgerald asserted that people in those countries nevertheless felt they were being branded as evil. Fitzgerald further defended his comments as reflective of comments he has heard from many in the Muslim world, noting that whether or not the perceptions reflected the reality of U.S. policy, they did exist. He also noted that vituperative criticism of the Muslim world by leading Christian voices in the U.S. seen as close to the Administration had strengthened this perception and "damned the USG by association."

Pope's Statements Defused Religious Clash

15. (C) Regarding broader relations between Christians and Muslims, Fitzgerald indicated that the Pope's opposition to war actually helped minimize the perception of division between the Christian and Muslim faiths, making clear that Christianity and the West are not one and the same. He believes the Pope's statements were instrumental in convincing many in the Muslim world that the war was not an

attack on Islam.

Working Together to Overcome Divisions

16. (C) The Ambassador emphasized the U.S. commitment to improving relations with Muslim countries and indicated that he believed the U.S. and Holy See could both advance our shared goals by better coordinating our outreach efforts. The Ambassador outlined Embassy planning for a cultural event in the next year that would seek to bring together Christian, Muslim, and Jewish performers, and suggested that this could offer a vehicle for additional engagement. Fitzgerald welcomed this initiative and agreed to consider how to expand Muslim participation.

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Vatican-Muslim Dialogue Still Lacking Partners
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17. (C) Turning to recent activities of Fitzgerald's Council, the Ambassador inquired about the status of the Holy See's outreach activities to the Muslim world. Fitzgerald pointed out that Muslim leaders had opted out of a recent meeting in Damascus, leaving Christian leaders from Muslim countries to discuss the state of relations among themselves. Acknowledging his frustrations, Fitzgerald observed that "unfortunately the Holy See does not choose its own partners (who are often selected by governments and are often not religious leaders). He also noted that Muslims who participate in dialogue with the Holy See are often criticized at home. On the plus side, Fitzgerald observed that the Holy See and its Muslim partners have been able to address issues that they would not have been able to talk about a few years ago, such as the situation of Christians in Muslim-majority countries. He welcomed recent developments in Qatar where the Emir has expressed interest in developing an institute for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Likewise in Asia, there will be a meeting in Subic Bay in the Philippines between Catholic bishops and Muslim leaders that Fitzgerald would attend, and which he expected would generate a healthy dialogue.

Comment

18. (C) Archbishop Fitzgerald's original comments reflect the unfortunate tendency among some Vatican prelates who take on board and pass along impressions gleaned from the European media without checking their facts or drawing distinctions between official U.S. policy and positions of other groups and voices within American society. Following this discussion and the extensive information we provided Fitzgerald about U.S. outreach to the Muslim world, we expect he will be more circumspect in future public pronouncements and could be a useful ally in inter-religious initiatives.

Nicholson

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